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This paper develops two models of the reference interview: (1) the Need-Oriented Model, which emphasizes identifying the client's information needs and allows for a broad-ranging diagnostic interview; and (2) the Question-Oriented Model, which is constrained by the client's initial question and focuses on refining that specific question, identifying why the client needs the information only if the client raises the issue. The models are then related to various environmental features of reference service such as the physical setup of reference service and staffing. Suggestions for promoting more involved interviews are offered. (MES)

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THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW: IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS

[Paper presented at the joint meeting of the D. C. Library
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Abstract: THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW: IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL
CONSTRAINTS

This paper develops two models of reference interviews: the Need-Oriented Model, which emphasizes identifying the client's information need and allows for a broad-ranging diagnostic interview, and the Question-Oriented Model, which is constrained by the client's initial question and focuses on refining that specific question, identifying why the client needs the information infrequently and only if the client raises the issue. Then, the author suggests that environmental constraints, such as physical setup and staffing patterns, often limit librarians to the Question-Oriented Model. The paper suggests that a more appropriate approach is to offer clients differentiated services and allowing clients to be intelligent consumers of reference service, based on their perceptions of their needs. The paper was originally presented at the joint meeting of the D. C. Library Association, Reference Section and the Virginia Library Association, Bibliographic Instruction Section, November 6, 1987, Crystal City, Virginia.

THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW: IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS

Introduction

Good morning, it's a pleasure to have a chance to talk with professional librarians, not just students, about an element of the reference process that I consider very important, the reference interview, and to have a dialogue with practicing librarians about some ideas that I am going to put forth in this talk.

What I will do first is discuss models for two different approaches to the reference interview, and then relate them to various environmental features of reference service. From this, I will make some suggestions for changes in the delivery of direct reference service.

Models of the Reference Interview

I have never heard a reference librarian say that one should not do a reference interview. Reference librarians avow an allegiance to it that is similar to their allegiance to God, motherhood, and apple pie. Talking about the reference interview is like waving the flag for good reference service. But how deep this allegiance is and how much it permeates their method of operating differs considerably. We have all observed very good interviews. We have witnessed fair to middling interviews. We have seen bad interviews. And we have observed encounters where, for all extents and purposes, there were no interviews.

And the explanations for what we have seen are almost

standard:

How can we conduct reference interviews when five other people are waiting in line?

Some people don't want us to ask a lot of questions.

The phone is ringing constantly.

It is impossible to work with this client.

I understood the question, so I didn't have to ask him anything.

I have heard these and a great many more, and even said these when I was a working reference librarian. And I am going to come back to the problems that they represent a little later in this talk.

Observation, of course, shows only surface behavior. Formally stated questions and answers are not the only elements within a reference interview. Librarians often know a vital bit of information and do not ask about it. If they did not, they would. The purpose of a reference interview, after all, is not to run through a standard set of questions, but to develop a meaningful overlap in the librarian's mental model for a reference problem and the client's mental model, enough so that the librarian can then go out and find appropriate information. If their mental models are similar, fewer questions have to be asked. An interview is not necessarily deficient because it did not follow a specified pattern or ask twenty critical questions.

But, in addition to simply observing, I usually ask librarians about what they are doing in the interview and why.

When you start to question librarians about the reference interview, it becomes apparent that there are differing opinions about what a reference interview is. These opinions, in turn, are based on what librarians view as their role as reference librarians.

For the purposes of this talk I want to set up two models which indicate differing approaches to the reference interview.

These models differ in their objectives, the perceptions or assumptions that underpin them, and their content. The first I will refer to as the Need-Oriented Model. The second is the Question-Oriented Model.

Figure 1. OBJECTIVES OF MODELS

NEED-ORIENTED

To understand the client's
INFORMATION NEED.

To identify information useful
to develop search strategy to
locate information to satisfy
that need.

QUESTION-ORIENTED

To understand the QUESTION.

To identify information useful
for locating information to
answer that question.

Objectives play a tremendous role in reference interviews because everything that follows is presumably guided by the objectives. With the Need-Oriented Model, the objectives are two-fold:

First, to understand the client's information need.

Second, to identify information that will allow the

librarian to conduct a successful search for information to satisfy that need.

With the Question-Oriented Model, the emphasis is on understanding the question the client asks, not the information need. The second objective in both models is similar, but, in the Question-Oriented Model, the emphasis is on seeking information that allows the librarian to answer this question. The relationship between the question the client asks and his need is not an objective.

Figure 2. UNDERLYING PERCEPTIONS OF MODELS

NEED-ORIENTED

Clients often do not know what they need and can benefit from the perspective of someone who knows more about information and information-seeking.

The reference librarian's role is first to verify that the request adequately represents the client's underlying information need, then to finding information or helping people find it.

RL's relevant information is a wide knowledge of information problems, problem-solving, strategies for finding information, and actual sources of information.

QUESTION-ORIENTED

Clients generally know what they need, but do not always phrase it usefully. If they do not, they will indicate their discomfort and I will be able to recognize it as a sign of a larger problem.

The reference librarian's role is to find information or help people find it, not to assist them in identifying the most useful information to resolve their problems.

RL's relevant knowledge is strategies for finding information and actual sources of information.

Now what is behind these two different approaches? What are the assumptions and ideas that they are based on? They differ in how they view the client: the Question-Oriented Model places greater faith in the client's ability to know his information need. But it recognizes that sometimes they do not phrase it exactly right so we can work with it. The Need-Oriented Model, on the other hand, believes that clients often are at sea about what to look for as well as how to find it. They need help in knowing what information will be useful to them.

With faith in the client's ability to know what he needs, the Question-Oriented Model says that the librarian's primary role is to find information or help the client find it. It is not as expansive as the Need-Oriented Model, which says that the librarian should first be intent on verifying that the request adequately represents the client's information need. Note that it at least allows for the possibility that, for some users, the question will match the real information need. It does not just assume that match, but checks on it.

As a result of this expanded role, the relevant knowledge base of librarians in the Need-Oriented Model is not just the knowledge of search strategies and actual sources of information that is called for in the Question-Oriented Model, but also a wide knowledge of information problems and problem-solving generally.

What are the implications of the objectives and these assumptions for the content of the interview? Let's look first

at the Need-Oriented Model. Remember, this model places less credence in the client's ability to know what he wants and calls for a larger role for the librarian. With this model, the client's opening question is simply an opening gambit in a conversation about the problem, what kind of information would be useful, how to solve it, and so on. The model recognizes that the initial question may have been rephrased to reflect what the client has found before, the kind of experiences he normally has

Figure 3. CONTENT AND PROCEDURE OF MODELS

NEED-ORIENTED

Initial question is viewed more as opening gambit in mutual problem-solving.

Less accepting of query as stated.

Analysis goes beyond semantics/syntax of question to assessing relationship between client's query and his problem.

More emphasis on diagnosis; therefore, more questions focusing on the problem.

Usually fewer questions related solely to search strategy.

QUESTION-ORIENTED

Initial question establishes parameters for subsequent discussion.

More accepting of query as given.

Emphasis on understanding semantics/syntax of question, not assessing whether it matches information need.

Often the questions emphasize the subject of the question, not the "answer requirements."

More questions related to search decisions.

No librarian-generated questions about underlying problem, why they need the information, how they are going to use it.

Still a tendency to followup problem/need comments if they occur, but not major focus of

interview.

in a library, and so on. As a result, the analysis that goes on during this interview ranges beyond the semantics and syntax of the immediate question to discussions about the reason the client is looking for the information he asked for. The emphasis is on diagnosis. Because this discussion is far-ranging, the librarian can often extract search-related information without asking specific questions. For example, if the librarian has gone on at great lengths about the subject and how it fits with various other subjects, he can draw on that to make decisions about index terms to use during the search.

The Question-Oriented Model accepts the initial question as a good match with the client's real information needs, so much so that a librarian, operating under this model, does not even bother to verify the match. The client makes a demand; the librarian accepts it. But, because the librarian may not exactly understand the demand, he or she may ask what a word means, and how that relates to another topic, and so on. Often the questions center around the subject of the question, not the nature of the information that is being sought. Because the emphasis is not on an independent diagnosis, but just acceptance of the client's diagnosis, or question, no questions are asked about problem or how the client intends to use the information. When the client mentions his motivation, the librarian, of course, follows up on it, but such problem-related questions are not a major focus of the interview. The emphasis is more on

search strategy and, with relatively little to go on other than the immediate question, the librarian may have to ask more search-related questions.

You may recognize similarities between these models and some of the approaches suggested by Patrick Wilson in his article about a face value rule in reference.¹ The first model is clearly need oriented; the second much more demand or question oriented. The impact of their objectives is obvious in the content of the interview. You may notice that I am not really addressing the form of the interview in my talk or in these models, but I suspect there may be some implications for the mix of open and closed questions and for some other form-related characteristics.

I really do not want to belabor the differences in these two approaches. They exist. My personal feeling is that the Need-Oriented Model gives the librarian greater flexibility in searching for information. In their initial question, people ask for what they know or what they have a reasonable expectation of finding. We may not be able to locate that information or it may not provide a good answer for them. In the Question-Oriented model, clients essentially make a demand, and librarians respond to that specific demand, perhaps clarified, but still a specific demand. There is no basis, unless it is accidentally obtained, for suggesting alternatives for that information. In the Need-

¹Patrick Wilson, "The Face Value Rule in Reference Work," RQ 25 (Summer, 1986), 468-75.

Oriented model, what should develop during the interview is a mutual understanding of a problem potentially answerable in several ways. One answer may be preferable for any number of reasons, but, if that answer is not available, the librarian can suggest other alternatives and may do that even before a search is attempted. There are simply more chances of solving the client's information need.

The Need-Oriented model is less limiting than the Question-Oriented and opens the door to a more dynamic, collegial relationship with the information seeker. And this, in turn, leads to better information retrieval.

Environmental Constraints

Everything that I have said so far is really just setting the stage for a few comments I want to make, however, on how the environment in libraries affects librarians' adherence to one or another of these models. I think the reference environment is a very strong factor in determining the kinds of reference interviews that take place.

Some librarians will never agree with me in my preference for the Need-Oriented model. They are philosophically opposed to the Need-Oriented model or they reject it because they feel that they cannot diagnose the client's need. The diagnostic role implied in the Need-Oriented model calls for greater subject knowledge and greater knowledge of problem-solving than the Question-Oriented. On the other hand, the knowledge of bibliographic control and information sources called for in both

does not differ radically. I could argue with them about their knowledge that is relevant to diagnosing, but convincing them may be more difficult. It is a riskier role and some librarians quite definitely do not want to assume it.

But I think many librarians agree with me and do feel a strong desire to respond to the real information need, rather than simply the question asked. They see the benefits of understanding how their clients are going to actually use the information or why they want it. It often makes their searches easier, helps to maintain their interest level over many years, and strengthens their sense of professional worth. And they act accordingly, or at least try to do so. But all too often, and this leads back to the reactions I mentioned earlier, they feel constraints outside themselves that prevent them from doing a good needs-oriented interview. And, as a result, they may feel some sense of guilt when they do less, even if the less is a necessity.

So, what are the constraints I have referred to? Are they fixable? Are they relics of a traditional stance that needs to be changed? Can they be changed? We must reconsider the options for reference service we give clients and offer them more differentiated services. We must allow them to be intelligent consumers of reference service, based on their perceptions of their needs. Let's shift some of the responsibility to them for determining the kind of reference service they want and need. Now, how can we do that? I wish I had all the answers, but I am

just going to broach some ideas at this stage about the elements that should be considered.

First of all, think about the physical setup of reference service in the libraries you know. The physical environment, for the most part, is optimal primarily for ready reference questions - you have a counter, a librarian standing or sometimes perching behind that counter so that he or she appears responsive to whoever comes up. The arrangement is completely open. Another client coming up hears the conversation between the librarian and the first client. They, in turn, are well aware that a queue that is starting to form. Sometimes a librarian actually walks away from the desk with the client to try to establish an arrangement that is more congenial to obtaining more information. Even then she is usually sensitive to neglecting other clients who may be approaching the desk or worse yet, not approaching because no one seems to be available. It conjures up an image of a sales clerk at a department store counter. Everything cries out for handling the client as quickly as possible and exchanging only information that can be regarded as non-personal. Is it surprising then that need-oriented reference interviews are relatively rare or that a high percentage of directional and ready reference questions are asked? Are librarians in this kind of setting effectively teaching the clients that the only kind of questions reference librarians can respond to are ready reference questions.

What about staffing patterns? I have watched desks at busy

times where not just one but several librarians are juggling clients, dispensing a few minutes here and there to try to be somewhat responsive. Are librarians doing anything to try to provide feedback to the client about slow periods during the day when the client could legitimately demand longer periods of attention, and, with it, the possibility of better reference interviews? Are we giving them an incentive for shifting their demands to another time? No, it seems to be we are simply rationing service by providing relatively few providers and then forcing them to spread themselves too thin among the many clients. And the first element to go is the needs-oriented reference interview!

What about the possibility of siphoning off some of the more programmable reference questions? Actually libraries have done a better job of this than with any solution, but more still needs to be done. Paraprofessionals are now valued for their ability to answer the easier questions. Better signs and point of use directions are the answer for some questions; pathfinders and other short bibliographies are another option. What about databases of suggested approaches or sources to frequent questions? The younger generation may actually feel more comfortable approaching a computer than an adult reference librarian. Bibliographic instruction in academic libraries is another way of presumably assisting a group of users efficiently.

How can we establish useful alternative channels for reference service that promote, or at least facilitate, more

involved responses. Can we establish systems, for example, which permit a client to choose between quick response and lengthier encounter and know what to expect. How about allowing a client to choose to enter a queue or come at a time slot where brief, search-directed encounters are the norm or, alternatively, to elect a time slot or a line where he can make claims to privacy, longer discussions, more assistance, needs-oriented interviews? Some libraries have done it, for special groups of clients, with reference by appointment. We do it as a matter of practice in many libraries when the client pays for an online search by an intermediary.

I do not think it has to be as elaborate as these alternatives necessarily, but it does seem that we should be thinking about optimizing something besides ready reference or service to clients who pay. Good needs-oriented reference interviews do not have to take an hour. A few minutes of concentration on the problem with the clear understanding about the purpose and expectations of the encounter are all that is necessary. Why not, for example, offer clients the chance to choose between a ready reference desk where they have to wait in line or signing up for a ten to fifteen minute interval to meet the librarian in his office, not at a public counter. They are guaranteed privacy, undivided attention, and a chance to seek significant help with their information problems. This kind of user is not well-served in many public and academic libraries today. Or, why not use the same system that is used in closed-

stack libraries. Ask the client to fill out a brief request form, which can be an interview schedule of sorts, submit it, take a number, and wait his turn -- away from the reference desk and the client being served -- for more substantial help. If library patrons are willing to wait for books from the stacks, it seems reasonable to expect that they will wait for good personal assistance. Couple this with a ready reference desk, and we are beginning to allow in a systematic way for greater differentiation in direct reference service.

Well, I hope I have given you food for thought. I am often frustrated when asked to talk about the reference interview or when I teach it in reference class. I can offer advice, guidelines, assistance about the interview itself. You can read similar items in the literature, but it isn't enough. We have to start talking about what prevents us from following this advice, what in the environment limits our ability to offer the kind of assistance that is needed in reference interviews. We help to make that environment, and we must recognize that only we can start to demand and create a healthy and long-needed change in the delivery of direct reference services.

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